

Achievement Gap

Recommendations for KBE Priorities 2005-2006

Priority. Despite many years of attention, the difference in academic achievement between disadvantaged, minority and students with disabilities and their peers continues to be a major problem in our schools. This discrepancy in performance is referred to as an "achievement gap" and there are significant gaps in the performance of these students on our CATS assessment. Even many schools and districts that have successfully raised their academic indices are struggling to close these gaps. As the deadline for schools in Kentucky to reach proficiency approaches, it has become apparent that much effort and attention still needs to be directed to various populations of students who lag behind in their pursuit of proficiency. To leave any group of students behind, represents a broken promise to the citizens of Kentucky and reflects a failure to apply the principles learned from decades of research that clearly articulates what must be done to enable all students to learn at high levels. Most of all, it fails to enable all children who leave our schools to succeed in life.

Current Status. The Kentucky Board of Education and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) initiated several steps to address closing achievement gaps. The Minority Student Achievement Task Force was established in 1999 to review and analyze achievement data, investigate research and promising practices in Kentucky and the nation and to develop actions to improve minority student performance in Kentucky. A major development from this group was a support network of partnership sites among the seven school districts serving most of Kentucky's minority students. KDE has also provided disaggregated data and technical assistance to districts to assist them in gap reduction efforts. In 2002, KDE formed a cross-agency to research and address achievement gap issues, support and assist stakeholders in closing achievement gaps and to identify schools closing the gap as models for replication. In spring 2003, KDE hired five regional Achievement Gap Coordinators to facilitate the efforts of schools and districts to eliminate achievement gaps and build capacity for whole school improvement.

There are schools and districts that have established policies and put programs in place that are having a positive effect on the performance of students in subpopulations. By looking at the measures these schools and districts have implemented and reviewing the research in this area, "Recommended Actions for Closing the Special Education Achievement Gap" has been developed and will be presented to the Kentucky Board Of Education at its June, 2005 meeting. These recommendations were developed because students with disabilities represent the largest achievement gap in the CATS assessment. This plan is the first step in KDE's overall goals and strategies for addressing all populations of students who are performing below expectations. Good practice and research have shown that many of the policies and strategies that close the gap for one group of students will have a similar effect on other groups of students.

Next Level. Assisting schools and districts in closing achievement gaps will require KDE to shift resources to accomplish the specific recommendations of the special education plan as well as to initiate and continue activities targeted in addressing the achievement gap for other subpopulations. Major commitments of time and resources are necessary in order to focus attention, change school cultures, and increase the capacity of schools.

Role of the Kentucky Board of Education. Successfully closing achievement gaps and assuring proficiency for every student will require concerted and focused effort by all educational stakeholders. The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) must provide the leadership for this effort by assuring that local and state policies and procedures are specifically designed to eliminate and close achievement gaps and barriers to learning. To realize this goal, the KBE can amend existing regulations, propose amendments to statutes, set the tone for the work within KDE and among districts and schools, direct resources, and communicate and work collaboratively with legislators, the Education Professional Standards Board, Institutes of Higher Education, the United States Department of Education, Kentucky Education Association, Kentucky School Boards Association, Kentucky Association of School Administrators, Kentucky Association of School Councils and other education partners. Closing the gap will in many instances require bold actions. Some of the areas in which KBE is encouraged to support and consider initiating actions include: (1) Requiring appropriate interventions be provided to all students experiencing reading difficulties in schools with achievement gaps since strong reading/literacy skills are foundational to closing the gap and learning; (2) Requiring individual learning plans based on diagnostic assessments for all students in schools with achievement gaps since continuous progress is essential in closing gaps; (3) Limiting or eliminating lower level courses/classes in middle and high schools and providing additional interdisciplinary courses as alternatives; (4) Working with teacher preparation programs to require at least 24 hours in special education content knowledge for all education majors; and (5) Providing incentives for gap reduction in the state school accountability.